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By James Scott Trimm

One of the most important questions we can ask about the New Testament is this: **In what language was it originally written?**

For most Christians and even many scholars, the answer seems obvious: Greek. After all, the earliest complete manuscripts we possess are in Greek. Yet there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that at least portions of the New Testament originated in Hebrew and Aramaic, the native languages of first-century Jews in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee.

Why does this matter?

Because there are numerous passages in the New Testament that make little sense in Greek, but suddenly become clear when examined through the lens of Hebrew and Aramaic. In many cases, apparent contradictions, historical difficulties, and puzzling statements disappear once we recognize the Semitic background behind the text.

The importance of Hebrew and Aramaic becomes even clearer when we remember that first-century Jews in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee thought, prayed, taught, and debated in Semitic languages. When a text is translated from one language into another, especially between unrelated language families, wordplays, idioms, and double meanings are often lost. In a number of New Testament passages, recovering the underlying Hebrew or Aramaic reveals meanings that are otherwise obscured in Greek.

The following examples illustrate why the Hebrew and Aramaic origins of the New Testament are so important.

The Famine That Struck “All the World”

In Acts we read:

> And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world.... Then the talmidim, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers dwelling in Judea.
>
> (Acts 11:27–30)

At first glance, this passage makes very little sense.

If the famine was going to affect **all the world**, why would the believers in Antioch send relief specifically to those living in Judea? Surely they would be suffering from the same famine themselves.

The solution appears when we examine the Aramaic text.

The Aramaic word used here is **ERA** (**אַרְעָא**), corresponding to the Hebrew **ERETZ** (**אֶרֶץ**; Strong’s #776). This word can mean:

- Earth
- World
- Land

And very often it serves as a euphemism for **the Land of Israel**.

In this context, “the world” is almost certainly not the intended meaning. Rather, Agabus was predicting a famine throughout **the Land of Israel**, which explains perfectly why the believers in Antioch collected aid for those living in Judea.

What appears to be a contradiction is actually the result of a translation choice.

Simon the “Leper”

Matthew records:

> And when Yeshua was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper...
>
> (Matthew 26:6)

Mark gives the same account (Mark 14:3).

But there is a problem.

According to Torah:

> He shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his habitation be.
>
> (Leviticus 13:46)

Those afflicted with biblical leprosy were not permitted to reside among the population. Yet Simon appears to own a home in Bethany where guests gather for a meal.

How can this be?

The answer may lie in a well-known feature of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic writing: the absence of vowel markings.

Without vowels, the Aramaic words:

- **GAR'BA** (**גרבא**) = leper
- **GARABA** (**גרבא**) = jar maker, potter, or jar merchant

would be written identically.

In this account a woman anoints Yeshua using ointment contained in a jar. The context itself points naturally toward Simon being a **jar merchant** or **jar maker**, rather than a leper.

Again, the Semitic background resolves a difficulty in the text.

The "Eunuchs" of Matthew and Acts

Yeshua says:

> ...there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake...
>
> (Matthew 19:12)

Later we read:

> A man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians...
>
> (Acts 8:27)

This raises a serious problem.

The Torah specifically excludes eunuchs from the assembly:

> He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the assembly of YHWH.
>
> (Deuteronomy 23:1)

Yet the Ethiopian in Acts appears to be a worshiper of the God of Israel making pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Why would Torah prohibit eunuchs from entering the assembly, while the New Testament seems to embrace them?

The answer may be linguistic.

The Aramaic word found in these passages is **M'HAIMNA** (מְהֵימְנָא), which can indeed mean "eunuch" in certain contexts. However, it can also mean:

- Believer
- Faithful one
- Trusted servant

The word derives from the same Semitic root as the Hebrew word אָמֵן (*Amen*) and the Hebrew verb הֶאֱמִין (*he'emin*—"he believed").

Under this understanding, Yeshua is speaking not about physical castration, but about devoted believers who dedicate themselves fully to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Likewise, the Ethiopian official becomes a faithful believer rather than a literal eunuch.

The passage suddenly aligns with Torah rather than conflicting with it.

The Camel Through the Eye of a Needle

Yeshua said:

> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

> (Matthew 19:24)

Many explanations have been proposed through the centuries.

Some have imagined a small gate in Jerusalem called “The Needle’s Eye.” Others insist the statement is simply hyperbole.

But the Aramaic offers another possibility.

The word translated “camel” is **GAMLA (גמלא)**.

This word can mean:

- Camel
- Large rope
- Thick cable

The image of trying to pass a thick rope through the eye of a sewing needle makes perfect sense and requires no appeal to later legends or hypothetical gates.

The saying remains vivid and powerful, but its imagery becomes more natural and understandable.

The Meaning of AZAL

One of the most misunderstood Aramaic words behind the Greek New Testament is **AZAL** (אֲזַל).

Normally it means “to go” or “to depart.”

However, in Aramaic idiom it often means that something is progressing, increasing, or continuing more and more.

This distinction dramatically affects several passages.

John 12:11

The King James Version reads:

> Because that by reason of him, many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

Went away from what?

The statement seems odd and unclear.

But if **AZAL** (אֲזַל) is understood idiomatically:

> Because many of the Judeans, on account of him, were trusting more and more in Yeshua.

Now the passage makes perfect sense.

John 15:16

The KJV reads:

> ...that ye should go and bring forth fruit...

But the Aramaic may be understood:

> ...that you should bear fruit more and more...

Rather than emphasizing physical movement, the passage emphasizes continual growth and increasing fruitfulness.

Again, the Semitic idiom unlocks the intended meaning.

More Than an Academic Question

These examples illustrate an important truth.

The New Testament emerged from a Jewish environment. Its authors were Jews. Its earliest audiences were largely Jews. Its concepts, idioms, and thought patterns are deeply rooted in Hebrew and Aramaic.

When translators rendered these texts into Greek, most of the meaning survived. But in some cases the translators misunderstood idioms, selected the wrong meaning of an ambiguous word, or translated too literally.

As a result, certain passages became confusing, contradictory, or difficult to understand.

Recovering the Hebrew and Aramaic background of the New Testament does not diminish Scripture. It helps us understand Scripture more accurately.

The Hebrew and Aramaic origins of the New Testament are not merely an academic curiosity. They are a key that often unlocks the original meaning of the text.

When we return the New Testament to its original Jewish context, many difficult passages suddenly become clear.

For the Nazarene believer, this is especially significant. The Good News was first proclaimed among Jews, in a Jewish land, by a Jewish Messiah, to Jewish disciples. Understanding the Hebrew and Aramaic background of the New Testament helps us hear those words as they were originally spoken and understood.

In doing so, we come one step closer to recovering the faith once delivered to the saints, and to understanding the message of Messiah as it was first proclaimed in Israel nearly two thousand years ago.